“THE MURDERERS OF GOD, THE LAWLESS NATION OF THE JEWS …”:

Coming to Grips with Some of Our Holy Week Hymns

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This article draws on a larger study, “Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in Byzantine Hymnography: Exegetical and Theological Contextualization,” in St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly *62 (2017).*

A DISCUSSION OF THE ANTI-JEWISH RHETORIC IN ORTHODOX HYMNOGRAPHY IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT TODAY – IN THE AFTERMATH OF ANTI-JEWISH POGROMS, IN THE SINISTER SHADOW OF AUSCHWITZ, AND AT A TIME WHEN THERE ARE CONTINUING TENSIONS BETWEEN PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND, ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE MODERN-DAY JEWISH STATE OF ISRAEL AND THEIR OWN GREEK HIERARCHY, ON THE OTHER. SUCH A DISCUSSION IS NECESSARY, HOWEVER. THE WORDS IN THE TITLE ARE FROM ONE OF THE *STICHERA* AT THE BEATITUDES CHANTED ON HOLY THURSDAY EVENING.[1] SIMILAR REFERENCES TO “ARROGANT ISRAEL, PEOPLE GUILTY OF BLOOD,” “BLOODTHIRSTY PEOPLE, JEALOUS AND VENGEFUL,” AND “THE PERVERSE AND CROOKED PEOPLE OF THE HEBREWS” OCCUR IN THE UNABBREVIATED ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE LAMENTATIONS SERVICE PRINTED IN THE *LENTEN TRIODION.* (IN CONTRAST, THESE STANZAS ARE OMITTED IN THE ANTIOCHIAN BOOK OF SERVICES FOR HOLY WEEK AND PASCHA.)[2]

It is true that this kind of language appears less strident when considered within the context of Byzantine rhetoric, and that the pattern is set by the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible (for example, Micah 6:1–5; Amos 2:9–12). Today, however, these invectives are deeply disturbing, especially since rhetoric of this kind has at times been part of the explosive mix that led to violence against Jews. As a matter of fact, "the Easter season was the traditional time for fights between Christians and Jews, which always had the potential to turn into pogroms," so that "traditionally the worst time for pogroms was Easter."[3]

What do we make of all this? If this is how we worship, do we also believe in this manner? Clearly, a discussion is necessary.

HYMNS OF HOLY WEEK AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The roots of Christian hymnography lie in the very distant past. Consider the following passages, taken from Byzantine hymns of the Passion and from the paschal homily of Saint Melito of Sardis, dated to the third quarter of the Second Century:[4]

Holy Friday: Antiphon 15	Melito of Sardis, "On Pascha," 96
Today, He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross.	*He who hung the earth is hanging He who fixed the heavens in place has been fixed in place He who laid the foundations of the universe has been laid on a tree*
He who is King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns. He who wraps the heaven in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery.	
He who in the Jordan set Adam free receives blows upon His face.	
The Bridegroom of the Church is transfixed with nails. The Son of the Virgin is pierced with a spear …	*The Master has been profaned, God has been murdered, the King of Israel has been destroyed …*

The Christological proclamation clearly follows a similar pattern in Melito's rhythmic prose and in the later Byzantine hymns: the lofty identity of the Lord, unveiled to the worshippers by recourse to biblical statements about the God of Israel, is united in a paradoxical way with the humility of the New Testament events.

> *Thus says the Lord to the Jews: O My people, what have I done to you, and how have you repaid Me? Instead of manna, you have given me gall, instead of water, vinegar ...*
>
> *Today the Jews nailed to the Cross the Lord who divided the sea with a rod and led them through the wilderness. Today they pierced with a lance the side of Him who for their sake smote Egypt with plagues. They gave Him gall to drink, who rained down manna on them for food.*
>
> *With Moses' rod Thou hast led them on dry ground through the Red Sea, yet they nailed Thee to the Cross; Thou hast suckled them with honey from the rock, yet they gave Thee gall.*
>
> *Be not deceived, ye Jews: for this is He who saved you in the sea and fed you in the wilderness.*[5]

We have here no less than the earliest Christology of the Church – *Kyrios Iēsous*, "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11) – wrapped in the beauty of poetry, and consumed liturgically. Scholars have pointed out the extraordinary diffusion of these kinds of compositions in Syriac, Greek, and Latin liturgical usage. The venerable Christian tradition popularized by the hymns is rooted in the even older tradition of prophetic reproaches of Israel (for example, Amos 2:9–12; Micah 6:1–5; compare also Nehemiah 9:26 for the theme of Israel killing the prophets).

The theological, liturgical, and pastoral considerations that are brought to bear on the hymnographic material must consider the larger context of the Church's growth from a charismatic, egalitarian, theologically innovative, and administratively schismatic group *within* first-century Judaism into the increasingly Gentile reality of the Second Century. Indeed, during the early decades of the Christian movement, the context for the vitriolic anti-Judaism found in the Hebrew Bible, in some apocalyptic writings of the Second Temple era, and in the New Testament (for example, "brood of vipers," "synagogue of Satan," "enemies of God," "sons of the devil") shifted gradually from harsh *intra*-Jewish polemics to polemics between the overwhelmingly Gentile Church and "the Jews." The observations of a prominent scholar of early Christianity, Oskar Skarsaune, are particularly to the point:

> It may be worthwhile to reflect a little on the genesis of this strongly anti-Jewish trait in early (and later) Christian hermeneutics.… As long as this tradition is used in an inner-Jewish setting, there can be no question of anti-Jewish (far less "anti-semitic") tendencies, but rather of extreme Jewish self-criticism.… Something fateful happened to this tradition when it was appropriated by Gentile Christians with no basic feeling of solidarity with the Jewish people. Very soon it deteriorated into a slogan about Jews being unbelievers by nature and Christ-killers by habit.[6]

ANTI-SEMITIC RANT OR CHRISTOLOGICAL PROCLAMATION?

A second necessary observation concerns the theological content of these hymns. The very fact that the biblical "Lord's reproaches to Israel" are placed on the lips of Christ points to the primarily Christological intention of the hymns. In the line quoted above, the point seems to be that *it is Christ* who rained manna in the desert; *it is Christ* who divided the Red Sea; *it is Christ* who smote Egypt with plagues; *it is Christ* who fed Israel in the desert – in short, *it is Christ* who is the "Lord" of the Exodus account. One could say, indeed, that the theological program of Holy Week is precisely the bold identification of the Lord Jesus with the "Lord" (κύριος/ *YHWH*), He-Who-Is, the God of our fathers, the thrice-holy Lord of the seraphim (Isaiah 6), the Glory enthroned upon the cherubim (Psalm 18:10 / LXX 17:11; Ezekiel 1; 10), the king of Israel (Isaiah 44:6).



The preceding observation holds true of Byzantine festal hymnography generally, and can be verified by recourse to other festal hymns (Baptism, Palm Sunday, Nativity, Presentation, and so forth), which are patterned creatively after the hymnography of Pascha. For instance, in the celebration of the Transfiguration the hymns explain that what Moses once saw in darkness, he later sees, on Tabor, in the blazing light of the Transfiguration: the same glory, the same "most pure feet," the same Lord.[7] The hymns of the Presentation are also replete with the same Christological reading of the divine manifestation on Sinai,[8] and the same occurs in the hymns of Epiphany: the Baptist is shaken with awe, knowing that he is to baptize the Maker of Adam,[9] the Lawgiver of Sinai.[10]

In all these hymns one encounters the same reading of biblical theophanies, and, by way of consequence, the same type of "YHWH Christology," or "Christology of Divine Identity" as some scholars refer to it. Yet the anti-Jewish polemic is largely absent! In my opinion, this absence demonstrates that the anti-Jewish overtones are not essential to the theological message of the hymns.

THE VERY HEART OF OUR TRADITION

The Christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies, which lies at the heart of much Holy Week hymnography, constitutes one of the most potent, enduring, and versatile "ingredients" in the gradual crystallization of a distinct exegesis, doctrine, liturgy, and spirituality from the earliest stages of apostolic Christianity and throughout the first millennium of the common era. The New Testament often alludes to the divine Name (Exodus 3:14, *egō eimi ho ōn*; Exodus 6:3, *kyrios*), and proclaims Jesus Christ as "Lord" (*kyrios*) – obviously a reference to the Old Testament "Lord" (*kyrios* in the LXX) seen by the prophets. This sort of "YHWH Christology" has been traced back to the New Testament. It figured significantly in catechetical manuals such as Saint Irenaeus' *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching,* and was not absent from Clement of Alexandria's elementary work, the *Instructor.* It contributed significantly to Justin Martyr's articulation of the Christian faith in opposition to the emerging rabbinic Judaism, and was part of the anti-Gnostic arsenal deployed by Saint Irenaeus and Tertullian as well in the anti-modalistic argument of Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, and later writers. The notion that the "Lord" who spoke to the patriarchs and prophet is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ was, by the end of the first millennium, inextricably linked to Christianity as performed and experienced in liturgy. It irresistibly commanded the gaze of the iconographer, the ready pen of the hymnographer, and the amazing tales of the hagiographer. It finds its visual counterpart in numerous Byzantine icons and manuscript illuminations; and in fourteenth-century Byzantium, it was yet again the christological exegesis of biblical theophanies that provided the exegetical infrastructure for the

Hesychastic controversy.[11]

It is clear, then, that the exegesis of biblical theophanies, displayed so prominently in Byzantine festal hymns, is not simply one strand of tradition among others, but the very heart of Christian tradition. It goes without saying that today's Orthodox Christians are to handle the spiritual treasure handed over to them with care and devotion; but, like the Sabbath, worship was made for man, not the other way around.

SOME PASTORAL AND LITURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The heavy anti-Jewish rhetoric in some Byzantine hymns raises serious ethical and pastoral problems today. Most non-Orthodox churches have sought to address these concerns by way of liturgical reform. Since the 1980s, the *Reproaches* are optional in U.S. Catholic parishes, and are usually replaced by other texts, such as Psalm 22. Some Byzantine-rite Catholic communities have tacitly replaced "Jews" and "Hebrews" with "evil men," "sinners," and so forth. A revised version used by Missouri Synod Lutherans replaces all reference to Exodus with verses such as "I have raised you up out of the prison house of sin and death," "I have redeemed you from the house of bondage," "I have conquered all your foes," "I have fed you with my Word and refreshed you with living water." A Methodist hymnal recommends adding several new verses (for example, "I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel, and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder. I made you joint heirs with them of my covenants, but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt") and suggests the creation of a contemporary version, using other examples of human abuse of God's gifts.

Rewriting or eliminating the problematic phraseology of some hymns can itself be deeply problematic if not done in consultation with the ecclesial body in such a way that it not only deals with the offending verses but also confronts the underlying problem of anti-Jewish animus. I would think it preferable to engage in a theologically sound and pastorally responsible Church-wide discussion of the Orthodox Christian engagement with the Judaism of the Synagogue, and, more generally, with those blood-relatives of the Lord who are our contemporaries. It is unconscionable today and unnecessary to continue singing that by Christ's lifting up on the Cross "the Hebrew race (*genos Ebraiōn*) was destroyed."[12] Whatever we can and must say about the *theological* rather than socio-political significance of this line, our proclamation today must be guided by pastoral sensitivity to the sufferings inflicted, not so long ago, upon millions of people simply for belonging to the "Hebrew race" by dictatorial states whose inhabitants claimed allegiance to the Christian faith. (After all, many of us know only too well, from our own tragic histories, what it means to be labeled as an enemy of the State and targeted for "re-education" or extermination.)

By the same token, we must have the necessary sensitivity for Orthodox Christians whose relationship with Judaism is shaped by the experience of being marginalized and oppressed within the State of Israel. Michael Azar – a New Testament scholar and Orthodox deacon – articulates this point very well:

> One ought not decontextualize the conversation related to possible emendation of these texts. To abstract any conversation related to Orthodox Christian-Jewish relations denies, for example, the considerably different contexts in which Orthodox Christians of Russia or the West and Orthodox Christians of Palestinian communities find themselves. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, as one important example, has diverse, complicated, and often tense relationships with the State of Israel, other Orthodox Churches (which are independent of each other) and, most importantly, the Christian faithful in its care that each offers a unique dimension to the need for the betterment of Christian-Jewish relations. The call to amend these liturgical texts in countries where Christians experience little or no tension or hardship in the name of Judaism or a Jewish State is a call that must be articulated carefully and sensitively when transferred to those areas where Christians indeed experience such things.[13]

The pastoral setting of some parishes in the Antiochian Archdiocese is particularly delicate: new immigrants from Syria and Palestine – people who equate the modern state of Israel with military occupation, police harassment, injustice, and humiliation – often worship side by side with Evangelical converts to Orthodoxy, many of whom retain the strong pro-Israeli convictions of their earlier (pre-Orthodox) Christian formation.

For all of us there is much to rediscover from the mind of the Church, starting perhaps with Saint Paul's admonition to the Gentile Christians – those grafted onto the olive tree of Israel: "Do not boast … it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (Romans 11:18). On this point I find the following statement by a learned Orthodox bishop helpful in charting our course forward:

> In Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's son and eternal Son

and Word of the Father, Israel has in a sense itself been crucified, raised, and changed, such as to become the "first-fruits" of the new creation (1 Cor 15:20), the "new" or "heavenly Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:45 ff.; Rom 5:12 ff.), the beginning of the world to come (Col 1:18). Yet, at least in Orthodox tradition, it would be most wrong to emphasize this change, these altered circumstances, as denoting rupture pure and simple with the Israel of the patriarchs, kings, and prophets. True, far and away the majority of Israel did not accept the change, and they carry on to the present apart from the Church, but I would maintain that that separation was and is not so much *between* Church and Israel, as between two separate and discrete entities, as it is a schism *within* Israel, a schism which, if we are to believe the Apostle, God — and only God! — will heal at the end of days (see Romans 9–11). Christian and Jewish polemics, both in the early centuries of the Church and in more recent times, may have often obscured this fundamental linkage and kinship, but they could not erase it. It is built into the earliest documents of Christianity and reflected continuously thereafter in Orthodox literature and liturgy. Thus for St. Paul, as I read him, the discussion at issue in epistles such as Galatians and, especially, Romans centers not on the rejection of Israel, but rather, through the Messiah, on the expansion of Israel's boundaries to include the nations.[14]

LITURGICAL REFORM WITH FAITH AND LOVE

If and when liturgical corrections are to be applied, we would do well to avoid some of the well-meaning but, in my view, theologically inept solutions adopted by our separated brethren. More specifically, it is of the utmost importance to avoid replacing concrete references to God's presence in the Old Testament (Passover, the Law at Sinai, the manna, the water from the rock) because this would dilute the Christological proclamation of the hymns: namely, that Christ himself is the LORD (*Kyrios*) in the Exodus narrative.

Rather than excise this most ancient and effective Christology by way of liturgical reform, it is imperative to emphasize that, far from warranting any sort of anti-Judaism, the prophetic reproaches against ancient Israel are actualized liturgically so as to address *Christians*, by calling them to recognize just Who it is that is facing them, so that they can commit themselves, "again and again," to Christ as "the Lord," the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the king of Israel. Once their Christological core is recognized as such, it is much easier to discern the essential ethical implications of the hymns. By "ethical implications" I have in mind the approach suggested by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware:

> If we deplore the actions of Judas, we do so not with vindictive self-righteousness but conscious always of our own guilt .... In general, all the passages in the Triodion that seem to be directed against the Jews should be understood in the same way. When the Triodion denounces those who rejected Christ and delivered Him to death, we recognize that these words apply not only to others, but to ourselves: for have we not betrayed the Saviour many times in our hearts and crucified Him afresh?[15]

I have shown above that the core Christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies is present in hymns in which anti-Jewish rhetoric is absent, and that the anti-Jewish overtones are therefore not essential to the theological message of the hymns. Liturgical reform might proceed in accordance with the criterion of maintaining this theological message (that Christ is the Lord of the patriarchs and prophets, the Lawgiver on Sinai, the enthroned Glory) while excising the anti-Jewish "flourishes." In some cases, it might be helpful to switch to the passive voice; in others, to deliberately change the addressee from "Jews" to "believers" or "brothers," *without, however, changing the Old Testament reference*. For instance, "Today the Jews nailed to the Cross the Lord who divided the sea … they pierced with a lance the side of Him who for their sake smote Egypt with plagues …" can become "Today is nailed to the Cross … the Lord who divided the sea … Today is nailed to the Cross the Lord who divided the sea … Today is pierced with a lance the side of Him who for their sake smote Egypt with plagues …" Or, similarly, "Do not be deceived, Jews: for this is He who saved you in the sea and fed you in the wilderness" could be changed to "Let us open well our hearts, O brethren: for this is He who saved Israel in the sea and fed them in the wilderness." And what would be lost if, rather than chanting "when You were lifted up today, the Hebrew nation was destroyed," the Church would instead focus on the fact that with the Lord lifted up on the Cross, death is destroyed and all mankind is summoned to inherit immortality?

In itself, the amendment of Orthodox liturgical texts and observances is neither wrong nor unprecedented. A very relevant example is "the contemporary practice of no longer proclaiming the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* with the more original censures against 'the Greeks,'"

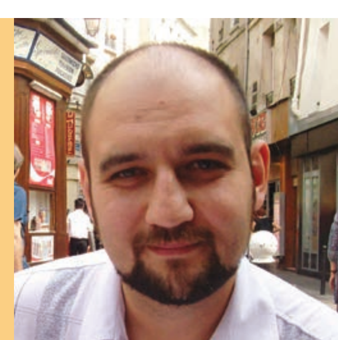
suggesting that “to choose to remove negative references against Jews is not far from this.…”[16]

The time has come for the Orthodox Church to exorcize the anti-Jewish animus lurking at the door, intent on defiling our worship and devouring our souls (Genesis 4:7). I close with the very pertinent words of Father Eugen Pentiuc, a scholar directly involved in teaching and advising Orthodox seminarians in the U.S. and the author of an impressive work entitled *The Old Testament: Eastern Orthodox Tradition*.

> The Orthodox Church as a whole, and especially and more effectively the hierarchs, should revise and discard anti-Judaic statements and allusions from hymnography and from liturgy itself, as a matter of fact. The poetry of Eastern Orthodox hymns is too sublime to be marred by such low sentiments echoing from a past dominated by religious quarrels and controversies.… Having said this, I am not calling here on a quick and *in toto* revision of the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, but rather for an ongoing serious reflection and congenial discussion on those anti-Judaic statements in hymnography, which are not and should not be part of such a sophisticated and Christ-centered tradition as is the Orthodox.[17]

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1. Great Friday Matins, Sticheron 3 at the Beatitudes (*The Lenten Triodion,* trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware [London/Boston: Faber&Faber, 1977], p. 589). The translation used in the Antiochian Archdiocese has “the assembly of the Jews, that wicked, God-attacking nation….”
2. From the service of Lamentations, Staseis 1 and 2 (*Triodion*, pp. 629, 630, 637).
3. John D. Klier, “The Pogrom Paradigm in Russian History,” and Peter Kenez, “Pogroms and White Ideology of the Russian Civil War,” both in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 33, 306.
4. Great Friday Matins, Antiphon 15 (*Triodion*, p. 587); *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha. With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans* (tr. Alistair Stewart-Sykes; Crestwood, NY: SVS, 2001), p. 96.
5. Holy Friday: Antiphons 12 and 6; Troparion of the Third Royal Hour (*Triodion*, pp. 583, 577, 603, 584).
6. Oskar Skarsaune, “The Development of Scriptural Interpretation in the Second and Third Centuries,” in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation I/1: Antiquity*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 404. See also Skarsaune’s more elaborate discussion in his more recent book, *In The Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), p. 262-264.
7. “Thou hast appeared to Moses both on the Mountain of the Law and on Tabor: of old in darkness, but now in the unapproachable light of the Godhead” (Second Canon of Transfiguration, Ode 1 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 483]); “He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “I am He who is” [Exodus 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples …” (Great Vespers of Transfiguration, Apostichon [*Menaion*, 476]).
8. Receive, O Simeon, Him whom Moses once beheld in darkness, granting the Law on Sinai, and who has now become a babe subject to the Law, yet this is the One who spoke through the law! …” (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried* [*Menaion*, 408]); “Today Simeon takes in his arms the Lord of Glory whom Moses saw of old in the darkness, when on Mount Sinai he received the tables of the Law …” (Presentation of the Lord: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 413]).
9. “The Maker saw the man whom He had formed with His own hand, held in the obscurity of sin, in bonds that knew no escape. Raising him up, He laid him on His shoulders [Luke 15:5], and now in abundant floods He washes him clean from the ancient shame of Adam’s sinfulness” (Second Canon of Theophany: Ode 5 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 372–373]).
10. [John the Baptist speaking to Jesus]: “Moses, when he came upon Thee, displayed the holy reverence that he felt: perceiving that it was Thy voice that spoke from the bush, he forthwith turned away his gaze [Exodus 3:6]. How then shall I behold Thee openly? How shall I lay my hand upon Thee?” (First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 370]).
11. See John S. Romanides, “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 6 (1960–1961), pp. 186–205; 9 (1963-1964), pp. 225–270; Bogdan G. Bucur, “Dionysius East and West: Unities, Differentiations, and the Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” *Dionysius* 26 (2008), pp. 115–138; “Sinai, Zion, and Tabor: An Entry into the Christian Bible,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010), pp. 33–52.
12. Great Friday Matins, Sticheron at the Praises (*Triodion*, p. 597). The translation used in the Antiochian Archdiocese has “the Hebrew race hath perished.”
13. Michael G. Azar, “Prophetic Matrix and Theological Paradox: Jews and Judaism in the Holy Week and Pascha Observances of the Greek Orthodox Church,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 10 (2015), p. 26.
14. Bishop Alexander Golitzin, “Scriptural Images of the Church: An Eastern Orthodox Reflection,” in *One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic: Ecumenical Reflections on the Church,* ed. Tamara Grdzelidze (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), pp. 255-256.
15. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “The Meaning of the Great Fast,” in *The Festal Triodion*, p. 60.
16. Azar, “Prophetic Matrix,” pp. 22–23.
17. Eugen Pentiuc, *The Old Testament: Eastern Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 40.



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